Is Religion Becoming Outdated?

by

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It is becoming increasingly common these days to come across people who say things like, "I am all for spirituality, but not religion," and, "I do not have a problem with God, but I *do* have a problem with organized religion," and, "I can worship God in my own way, religious rituals feel very unnatural to me and are outdated," and so on.

According to different polls, these spiritual or religious "nones," as some have called them, appear to be on the rise,[1] and nothing suggests that their numbers will dwindle anytime soon.

What explains this phenomenon? Why are people becoming so vehemently opposed to the idea of religion in general, rather than only being averse to specific religions they find detestable? Several reasons have been suggested,[2] such as:

- **A growing sense of autonomy.** Many are being taught to "think for themselves," even if it results in breaking away from tradition and religion. Thus, as more people feel emboldened to question their beliefs, many find themselves abandoning religion altogether.

- **Social factors.** Some studies have shown a link between embracing non-religious worldviews and being born into a mixed-faith family,[3] befriending "spiritual nones" themselves,[4] marriage to non-religious spouses, etc.

- **Political polarization.** In the past, religion used to assemble people and define them politically, but this is no longer the case to the same extent.[5] Thus, people

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[1] See: Hogan, M. 2019. *The Rise of the "Nones": The Next Step in the Evolution of Religion*, Available online.

[2] See: Mercandante, L. 2020. Spiritual Struggles of Nones and 'Spiritual but Not Religious' (SBNRs), *Religions*, **11**(10), p. 513; Fuller, R.C. 2001. *Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Schneiders, S.M. 2003. Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum, *Spiritus*, **3**(2), pp. 163-185; and Newport, F. 2019, Why Are Americans Losing Confidence in Organized Religion? *Gallup*, Available online.

[3] This may explain why there are Muslim scholars deeming such marriages to be discouraged.

[4] This brings into perspective the famous hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him): "A man follows the religion of his friend; so each one should consider whom he makes his friend." [Sunan Abī Dāwūd and at-Tirmidhī]

[5] I would argue that we should not generalize this point and that this is only limitedly true in some countries with some classes of people.

disregard religion and instead elevate the importance of those factors that contribute to political mobilization.

- **Quest for authenticity.** Many people wish not to be confined to a particular religion as it makes them feel less authentic and "true to themselves." Instead, they desire to choose a path that fully resonates with them at a personal level.

- **An increasing distrust in institutions.** In some countries such as the United States, misgivings about organized religions with clerical systems align with the growing trend of general skepticism about institutions, such as government, the media, corporations, etc.

- **Increased education.** Some have argued that increased education has made several people view religion as less relevant to their lives, especially if they are inclined towards the study of the sciences, as people's minds become more shaped to not "blindly believe" in anything and reject the supernatural.

- **Intellectual curiosity.** Some people do not feel that any single religion defines them and prefer experimenting with different rituals from a host of religions till they find what works for them and aligns with their "spiritual personality."

- **Shift of focus toward more humanistic concepts.** The Enlightenment promoted certain aspects of religion, including notions such as morality, worldly progress, and free will, while discarding others. This resulted in viewing rituals and being preoccupied with one's fate in the afterlife as backward or otherwise irrelevant.

- **Egalitarian concerns.** Driven by egalitarian ideals, many people struggle with the idea of a clerical system, which allegedly presupposes that the clergy deem themselves to be spiritually 'superior.'

Other reasons include temptations to join the mounting trend towards non-religion, exposure to greater cultural diversity, secular cultural conditioning, the hypocrisy observed in several 'religious' people, moral and intellectual disagreements with religious doctrines, and so on.

I do not wish to dismiss all of these concerns offhand as *totally* unreasonable. Undoubtedly, experiences with religions differ from person to person, and some grievances with certain religions may be legitimate.

Nevertheless, I think that some of the matters raised need not be entertained too seriously. For instance, there is the concern that people have with hypocritical religious people. Surely, though, not all religious people are hypocritical, nor do religions teach people to be such. Thus, it would be unfair for one to judge religions based on a selective sample of their adherents when they do not even strictly abide by their religions' injunctions.

Let us also take "autonomy" and "intellectual curiosity" as other examples. Being autonomous and intellectually curious by thinking for ourselves need not lead us to reject religion altogether. One could be a fully independent and inquisitive person, yet convert to another religion, or even become more confident in his current one. Not everyone who sticks to the religion he was born into is necessarily a blind follower of that religion. Nor is everyone who abandons religion for non-religious alternatives necessarily a "free thinker."

Moreover, sticking to one religion does not necessitate being less authentic and true to ourselves. In Islam, for example, we find a rich and vast array of scholarly discourse proffering a variety of opinions in wide-ranging disciplines from which the Muslim is free to choose. A Muslim could still feel 'authentic' by choosing to adopt from the various valid religious opinions at his disposal, despite doing so within the broad parameters of Islam.

Also, there is nothing 'unscientific' about a religious person who believes in the supernatural realm, as science as an epistemic tool is limited to assessing the natural world. This is notwithstanding the positive role religion could play as it complements science.[6]

Whatever general grievances one may have with religion due to personal experiences, these grievances must be weighed against many of the positive advantages of religion. We will look at some of these advantages below.

The Benefits of Religion

By religion, I am broadly referring to a system of mutually shared beliefs and practices that serve as a means for one to grow spiritually. This would include both theistic religions (e.g., Islam, Christianity, etc.) and nontheistic religions (Buddhism, etc.).

Some[7] have pointed out several benefits of religion, such as:

- **Improvement in happiness and mental health.** Several studies have highlighted a strong positive correlation between mental well-being and religiosity. Some of the reasons for this are that ascribing to a religion provides

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[6] See: Craig, W. *What is the Relation between Science and Religion?* Available online.

[7] See: Lock, S. 2013. Happiness. In: Taliaferro, C., Harrison, V.S., & Goetz, S. ed. *The Routledge Companion to Theism*, New York: Routledge, pp. 666-677; McCullough, M. E., Bono, G. & Root, L.M. 2005. Religion and Forgiveness. In: Paloutzian, R. F. & Park, C. L. ed. *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, New York: The Guilford Press, pp. 394-411; Boundless Courses, *The Functionalist Perspective on Religion*, Available online; Fagan, P. 1996. Why Religion Matters: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability, *The Heritage Foundation*, Available online.

access to a vast network of non-family social support, improves mental health through optimism about the future, relieves one from the stress of grappling with existential questions, etc.

- **Providing social cohesion.** Religion could effectively create and uphold social unity through collectively shared beliefs and rituals.

- **Encouragement of forgiveness.** Several scholars have pointed out that all the major world religions are structured to highly encourage forgiveness.

- **Strengthening the family unit.** Some studies have shown that marital stability directly correlates to the spouses' religiosity and serves as a reliable predictor of marital success.

- **Social regulation.** Religion could enable and facilitate the social enforcement of moral codes.

- **Inoculation against social problems.** Studies have demonstrated that increased religious practice generally prevents social ills such as drug abuse, out-of-wedlock births, suicide, alcoholism, etc.

Other suggested benefits include anti-depression, better chances of illness recovery, greater self-esteem, etc.

However, it could be argued against some of these points that they are not necessarily unique to religion (e.g., social cohesion). Moreover, some of these benefits heavily rely on how qualitatively good the religion in question is (e.g., social control). Nevertheless, there is merit in these arguments when presented accumulatively, albeit with qualifications.

Having said that, I would contend that these are not the primary benefits of religion, especially theistic religions. Rather, religion's principal benefit lies in its being the optimal means through which one can traverse a spiritual path to God.

Religion as the Ideal Framework for Spirituality

David McPherson describes spirituality as:

> A practical life orientation that is shaped by what is taken to be a self-transcending source of meaning, which involves strong normative demands, including demands of the sacred or the reverence-worthy...Thus, spirituality in the fullest sense is more than just belief in God, or a spiritual force ("fate," "destiny," etc.), or the recognition of something sacred. Spirituality requires actions that will bring about and express a spiritual transformation, which involves growth toward spiritual

fullness. We can also describe this as a process of sanctification (i.e., making holy), where one seeks to have a proper relationship in feeling and in action to what is seen as sacred or holy or reverence-worthy. In other words, one seeks to become more God-like or virtuous in accordance with a spiritually inflected understanding of the good life. [8]

Drawing upon the insights of classical Islamic theologians[9] and contemporary western philosophers,[10] I will briefly present some reasons in favor of why spirituality is optimally pursued through the adoption of a theistic religion in particular.

We must consider the essentiality of theological creeds and doctrines that non-religious spiritual systems typically neglect to have. An established theology is critical for several reasons, such as:

a. **It increases our love for God by informing us of His attributes.** Other than being our creator, what do we know about God? Just as our love increases for people as we better come to know them, the same applies to God if we wish to build a loving and spiritual relationship with Him. Knowing God demands that we come to learn of and contemplate His beautiful attributes of mercy, justice,

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[8] McPherson, D. 2017. Homo Religiosus: Does Spirituality Have a Place in Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics? In: McPherson, D. ed. *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 64

[9] See: Al-Ghazālī, M. 1975. *Maʿārij al-Quds fī Madārij Maʿrifat an-Nafs*, 2nd edition, Beirut: Dār al- Āfāq al-Jadīdah; Al-Ghazālī, M. 2003. *Al-Iqtiṣād fī al-ʿItiqād*, Ramaḍān, I. ed., 1st edition, Beirut: Dār al-Kotaiba; Al-Āmidī, S. 2004. *Abkār al-Afkār fī Uṣūl ad-Dīn*, al-Mahdī, A. ed., 2nd edition, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wal-Wathāiq al-Qawmīyyah; Al-Busnawī, K. 2007. *Ishārāt al-Marām min ʿIbārāt al-Imām Abī Hanīfah an-Nuʾmān fī Uṣūl ad-Dīn*, al-Mizyadī, A. ed., 1st edition, Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyyah; Al-Fihrī, S. 2010. *Sharḥ Maʾālim Uṣūl ad-Dīn lil-Imām Fakhruddīn ar-Rāzī*, Ḥammādī, A. ed., 1st edition, Amman: Dār al-Fatḥ; Al-Jawzīyyah, I. 2011. *Miftāḥ Dār as-Saʾādah wa-Manshūr Wilāyat al-ʿIlm wal-Irādah*, Qāid, A. ed., 1st edition, Makkah: ʿĀlam al-Fawāid; An-Nasafī, M. 2011. *Tabṣirat al-Adillah fī Uṣūl ad-Dīn*, Īsa, M. 1st edition, Cairo: al-Jazīra

[10] See: Schneiders, S.M. 2003. Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum, *Spiritus*, **3**(2), pp. 163-185; Cottingham, J. 2005. *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Cottingham, J. 2014. *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Cottingham, J. 2017. Philosophy, Religion, and Spirituality, In: McPherson, D. ed. *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 11-28; Cottingham, J. 2017. The Spiritual and the Sacred, In: Carroll, A. & Norman, R. ed. *Religion and Atheism Beyond the Divide*, New York: Routledge, pp. 130-140; Park, C. L. 2005. Religion and Meaning. In: Paloutzian, R. F. & Park, C. L. ed. *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, New York: The Guilford Press, pp. 295-314; McPherson, D., *op. cit.*

glory, etc. However, without an actual theology to refer to, such an endeavor would lack any firm grounding.

b. **It apprises us of God's relationship to us.** Are human beings God's friends, enemies, spiritual children, servants, puppets, etc.? Are we some of these things, all of these things, or none at all? If some or all of them, then are we so conditionally or unconditionally? Where precisely are human beings situated in terms of their relationship to God? Knowing this is important, as the kind of relationship we have with Him would necessarily determine the nature of our reverence to Him. Without theological doctrines conveyed to us through divine revelation, we could only speculate about the answer to this pivotal question.

c. **It clarifies our purpose in life.** What does it *truly* mean to have faith in God? Is faith merely about cognitively acknowledging God's existence, or does it also entail some level of submission to Him? Does He desire us to worship Him, or are people who pray to Him simply wasting their time? Also, who said that the purpose of life is necessarily about *our* "personal spiritual journeys"? Perhaps there is something greater to life than us striving for private spiritual pursuits that make us "feel more comfortable on the inside"? We do not have the authority to make ourselves the arbiters of who God is and what He asks of us.

d. **It directs our worship and suffuses it with meaning.** We worship God with our hearts, speech, and limbs. With our hearts, we love Him and yearn to see Him. We fear Him yet feel gratitude to Him for the blessings He bestowed upon us. In our speech, we say our prayers and glorify Him and beseech Him to answer our supplications. With our limbs, we bow and prostrate to Him in the pinnacle act of submission. What we are to feel, say, and do as we manifest our reverence to God is strongly interconnected with and guided by our theological beliefs concerning Him. For example, all this worship would be a waste of time if this God turned out to be deistic in nature.[11]

e. **It makes sense of the world for us.** How does God interact with the world? Is there such a thing as fate? How much free will has God given us, if any at all? Is there an afterlife or a path to salvation? And if so, is this life a test filled with hardships God expects us to bear patiently as part of His broader plan for us? Theology answers these questions in a manner that non-religious frameworks of spirituality could never. It provides us with a framework that enables us to perceive, understand, and evaluate the events of this world as part of God's bigger plan. Having such knowledge makes the world and what happens in it more meaningful and sensible to us.

f. **It provides a means for discussing and scrutinizing different spiritual practices.** With our theological beliefs, we can express a systematic and coherent picture of what we believe about God and how we spiritually seek to

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[11] For a detailed critique of deism, see: Zawadi, B. 2019, *A Critique of Deism*, Available online.

attain a loving relationship with Him. This, in turn, enables us to engage in dialogue with others regarding our beliefs. It also allows us to carefully assess seemingly harmful and potentially exploitative spiritual practices (e.g., self-flagellation, healing crystals, etc.) that could at times shroud themselves in mystery in order to evade critical evaluation.

g. **It affords us moral clarity.** Is God a morally good being who issues moral dictates to human beings to adhere to? Does the universe exhibit a moral order that demands we orient our lives to abide by it? Do we have intrinsic moral worth as human beings that makes us superior to other creatures such as animals and insects? Are there moral values worth exhibiting and possibly even fighting for? How do we rectify our moral judgments? A sound theological framework offers pertinent answers to such critical questions.

As a being, God is too important[12] and transcendent to be understood impressionistically. Rather, God honors and exhibits His compassion to human beings by speaking to them through intelligible revelation.

Spiritual practices must facilitate the development of a better self. Their ultimate role is to help us take care of our souls by purifying them of our sins, as opposed to merely assisting us in experiencing oceanic feelings of serenity and to feel good about ourselves. For the latter, there are 'quick fixes' for that, such as tranquilizers or narcotics.

Spirituality is not merely some reductive idea of rejecting materialism but an actual path to pleasing and connecting with God Himself. God is a genuine intrinsic source of value that is inherently worthy of striving to connect with, and it is only via that connection that our lives are genuinely fulfilled, and our hearts find true contentment.

In their opposition to "organized" or "institutionalized" religions, what many of these "spiritual nones" fail to grasp is that with ardent and consistent pursuits of a spiritual connection with the divine, one cannot help but come to realize that spiritual practices inevitably tend to become routinized and "organized." This occurs as these practices become tested with time and appear to be effective in contributing to spiritual development in the eyes of its practitioners.

Are Religious Rituals Outdated and Backward?

In Islam, worship is an immersive way of life that extends beyond rituals. Ibn Taymiyyah said, "worship (Al-'Ibadah) is a comprehensive term encompassing everything that Allah loves and is

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[12] Freddie deBoer stresses this point nicely when he states:

"If God exists then that is the single most important fact in the history of creation and nothing else can take its crown, ever. If a being exists, of whatever nature, who created reality, exists within all of reality, set reality's physical and moral rules, watches over all of reality, judges all of us on how devout and moral we are, and determines reward and punishment based on that judgement, that clearly is the truth that trumps all other truths." (deBoer, F. *What Became of Atheism, Part One: Wearing the Uniform*, Available online)

pleased with—whether sayings or actions, both outward and inward."[13] So whether it is obedience to our parents, giving charity, visiting the sick, helping others, establishing ties of kinship, being honest in our business dealings, standing up for the oppressed, feeding the hungry, protecting the environment, etc. worship constitutes any action beloved by God when it is performed with the correct intention of pleasing Him.

Nevertheless, religious 'rituals' still form an essential aspect of worship in Islam. Some find the idea of rituals to be archaic, but this sentiment is odd, to say the least.

Rituals are similar to routines in a way, but unlike routines that usually tend to be tasks we seek to treat as habits (e.g., having breakfast before going to school, making your bed after you wake up, etc.), rituals have a more meaningful purpose underlying them. They are meant to be regarded as important instead of merely being treated tasks we tick off a to-do list. They are not mere habits but rather demand our attention and conscious presence. When engaging in these rituals, there should be a certain level of intention, drive, devotion, and energy. When performed without being understood and appreciated, these rituals get reduced to tedious chores that we'd rather be without. The problem here is not the ritual, but the understanding of the ritual and how it is being performed.

We follow rituals in many spheres of our lives, and we do so because they are greatly valuable. For example, rituals are very beneficial in improving corporate culture by creating connections and strong habits, elevating employee engagement, and facilitating continuity, onboarding, and training.[14] Research has also shown that rituals effectively alleviate grief by helping people cope with the death of loved ones, reduce anxiety, increase confidence before performing tasks by positively influencing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.[15] We also perform rituals to give structure and order to our daily lives, celebrate joyous occasions, commemorate historical events to stay connected to our past, sustain communal identity by forging bonds through shared practices, mark important events and phases in our lives, etc.

In light of all this, if rituals could be so effective and beneficial in different spheres of our lives, then why is it difficult to grasp their positive force in the domain of religious worship as well? From the Islamic perspective, Muslims have written extensively about the profound spiritual, physiological, and communal benefits undergirding the rationale of rituals such as the Salah, Fasting, Hajj, etc. To keep this article short, I will not delve into them here, but they are merely a google search away for anybody curious to know more.

Undoubtedly, these rituals lose their utility and meaning when the person mindlessly practices them as mere habits and merely goes through the motions of the rituals; however, one cannot blame

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[13] Ibn Taymiyyah, A. 1995. *Majmu' al-Fātawá*, Qāṣim, A. ed., Medina: King Fahd Complex, vol. 10, p. 19

[14] Coleman, C. 5 Powerful Ways Rituals Improve Corporate Culture, *Culture Wise,* Available online; Loehr, J. & Schwartz, T. 2003. *The Power of Full Engagement*, New York: The Free Press, pp. 162-182

[15] Gino, F. & Norton, M.I. 2013, Why Rituals Work, *Scientific American*, Available online.

the idea of rituals themselves for the wrong frame of mind exhibited by some (or even many) of those who engage in them.

Undoubtedly, there are many harmful rituals practiced by people, such as self-flagellation, for example. Yet, would it be fair for us to judge *all* rituals simply because there are some (or even many) harmful ones? Surely, we should avoid committing such a fallacy.

In short, there is nothing irrational or archaic[16] about the idea of worship rituals in the least.

Conclusion

As a Muslim who believes Islam to be the only true religion, I most certainly am not defending all religions, creeds, and practices, but rather only the *idea* of religion itself. I do not believe that all the advantages attributed to religion are positively exemplified by and applicable to all religions. Moreover, I believe that theistic religions (e.g., Islam, Christianity, etc.) as concepts are significantly more advantageous when contrasted with nontheistic religions (e.g., Buddhism), especially when the former provide a much more robust theological framework that could undergird spiritual practice. As a Muslim, I would even go further by arguing that Islam is superior to all religions.

Religions as a whole provide for a much more optimal context in which spiritual nourishment and growth can occur. Popular "do-it-yourself" spirituality, as discussed above, is not proper spirituality as it lacks a coherent theological framework underpinning it. The idea of religion remains relevant and will continue to be so. Those who have argued for its irrelevance and outdatedness are urged to examine their stance more carefully.

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[16] Many people who raise these objections fail to properly ponder upon the significance of these rituals. Consider Dr. Jordan Peterson's insightful comment regarding animal sacrifice in one of his public talks on the psychological significance of the biblical stories:

"That's the reason Abraham is constantly making sacrifices. It's archaic, right? He's burning up, like, baby lambs. Well, they're alive; that's something. And they're valuable; that's something. You have to admit—even if you think about it as a modern person—that the act of sacrificing something might have some dramatic compulsion to it. To go out into a flock, and take something that's newborn, and to cut its throat, and to bleed it, and to burn it, **might be a way of indicating to yourself that you're actually serious about something**. It isn't so obvious that we have rituals of seriousness like that now. And so it's not so obvious that we're actually serious about anything. And so maybe that's not such a good thing. Maybe we shouldn't be thinking that these people were so archaic and primitive and superstitious. It's possible that they knew something that we don't." (Peterson, J. *Biblical Series IX: The Call to Abraham Transcript*, Available online; emphasis mine).